

A Sketchy Bit Of Lithuanian History

Lithuanian independence was not high on the agenda when the British, American and Soviet leaders met at Yalta in February of 1945 to discuss the postwar boundaries of Eastern Europe. The final volume of Winston Churchill's World War II memoirs, which devotes considerable space to these matters, does not list "Lithuania" in the index.

By Churchill's account, it was the Soviets who first mentioned Lithuania, in the context of United Nations membership eligibilities. With evident satisfaction, he reported to London on Feb. 7, 1945, that the Soviets were no longer insisting that all of their republics should be U.N. members. "(Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov said) they would be content if three, or at any rate two, of their republics became original members, namely the Ukraine, White Russia and Lithuania. All were important, all had made great sacrifices in the war; they were the first to be invaded and had suffered greatly."

This, Churchill continued, "was a great relief to us all, and Mr. Roosevelt was quick to congratulate Molotov."

There may have been more to this than Churchill recorded, but it seems evident that neither the British nor the Americans seized an obvious opportunity to assert that Lithuania was not a mere Soviet "republic," but a sovereign nation robbed of independence in 1940.

The Churchill book also contains some useful maps, particularly one showing the 1919 "Curzon Line," which the 1945 Big Three agreed would provide the basis for the post-World War II border between Poland and the Soviet Union. This meant that the Poles would have to renounce their claim to a substantial chunk of the eastern territory that they occupied between 1919 and 1939, receiving in exchange a more or less equivalent slice of prewar eastern Germany.

Because the Churchill map is small and not easy to read, I opened a 1934 school atlas to locate the major points and found, to my mild surprise, that "Vilnius," or "Wilno", or "Vilno" or "Vilna," was not shown in 1934 by Rand McNally as the capital of Lithuania, but as a provincial city in eastern Poland. "Kaunas" was starred as the Lithuanian capital.

These sketchy bits of history and geography are, I suspect, well known to President Bush's professional advisors and, of course, to the various Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, Germans and others most closely concerned. I do wonder, and even worry if they are as familiar as they might be to those American politicians who are busy telling us what we should do about Lithuania's relations with the Soviet Union in 1990.

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